

From A to Zen – Exploring the Wisdom of China – Part 4 of 7

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Series Foreword

Living in China or visiting as a foreigner can be a puzzling and bewildering experience. While on the surface much is familiar, any interest and interaction that runs more than skin-deep leads to a vast world, rich in tradition, symbolism and meaning. Any degree of openness to this world brings with it an experience of its culture and an appreciation of just what culture means and how it shapes not just a society and its country but the way in which people think and act in everyday life. In many respects, this way is markedly different from other cultures.

What is it then that is responsible for this difference? Well it is essentially a myriad of customs, art forms and traditions - traditions of practice and of ideas and beliefs. Thinking about it, the list seems endless. However, in 2006, the Chinese State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH) did in fact begin to compile it. It is known as the list of national intangible cultural heritage and already contains over 1000 items, including music, ethnic festivals, folk tales, martial arts and even sacrificial cults. Work on the list continues.

Some of the more fascinating and important parts of this heritage are ideas and concepts that deal with religion, philosophy, and spirituality, many of which have long found resonance in other cultures. You have probably heard of Confucius, Yin and Yang, Tai Chi, Feng Shui, and Zen Buddhism (note: the term Zen is the Japanese form of the original Chinese 'Chan' and is used here synonymously, simply because it is more widely known). Perhaps you are also familiar with Taoism, Qi Gong, Bagwa, Guan Yin, Sun Tzu, the I-Ching and the Tao de Ching, the book of changes. These are all quite different things, and yet they are very closely related. And more importantly, they are traditions that have helped shape these lands for thousands of years and are still having an impact today.

In fact, these traditions do not just lie dusty and dormant in the social sub-conscious as it were; they are alive and thriving, as the second World Buddhist Forum recently demonstrated. This was held from March 28th to April 1st 2009 in Wuxi and Taipei, China. According to Jing Yin, Director of the Center of Buddhist Studies at the University of Hong Kong, Buddhism in China is enjoying a revival, representing progress in Chinese society.

A 2007 survey of the East China Normal University showed that 31.4 percent of Chinese above the age of 16 are religious. In total numbers that is about 300 million. Furthermore, 66 percent, or about 200 million, of these are Buddhists, Taoists, or worshippers of legendary figures. Some argue that, as Chinese Society is becoming more diverse, there is more social space for the development of religions, especially Buddhism, which has played a long and influential role in China.

This series is an exploration into how ancient ideas from Eastern philosophies and religion are still shaping today's cultures and how, in some cases, they have been becoming increasingly relevant. While we follow a somewhat alphabetical order, we will not give dry and lengthy definitions as you might find them in an Encyclopedia, but rather follow a path leading through stories and anecdotes, looking at science, literature, arts and music. We will be looking at the works of people as diverse as Fritjof Capra, John Cage, Herman Hesse, The Duke of Edinburgh, Robert Pirsing and see what it is that relates them to this ancient wisdom of China.

Throughout this series, inspiration will be drawn from the work of one person who has done perhaps more than anyone else to try and understand this wisdom and make it intelligible to a Western audience. This person is Alan Watts.

Alan Watts

In over 40 years of work Alan Watts earned a reputation for being the foremost interpreter of Eastern philosophies to the West and developed an audience of millions. He wrote more than 25 books and many articles and essays on issues of religion, philosophy and spirituality. He lectured, gave public speeches and seminars, made films, and broadcasted a long running weekly radio program with Pacifica Radio in California. His work and interests led him to meet many prominent figures such as Carl G. Jung, Robert Anton Wilson, John Cage, Joseph Campbell, Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg and many more. Throughout his accomplishments, Chinese Zen Buddhism and the tradition of Taoism feature prominently, and their ideas and stories are a recurrent theme. He studied written Chinese and practised Chinese brush calligraphy. While he was undoubtedly an expert and learned scholar of Zen, he developed his own unique blend of philosophy. When the famous Japanese scholar and author T.D. Suzuki was once asked if Alan Watts taught Zen he replied: 'No, Alan Watts teaches Alan Watts'. Still, Zen anecdotes, themes and ideas from Chinese sages and scholars such as Lao Tzu, Lao Zi, and Zhuang Zi are an integral part of the teachings of Alan Watts.

Alan Watts was born in 1915 in a small town called Chislehurst in the south-east of London. He later went to various boarding schools where he received academic and religious training. His first childhood contact with Chinese culture was in the form of art; landscape paintings and embroideries that had been given to his mother from returning missionaries. The style of these fascinated him and played a part in inspiring him to learn more about Buddhism. In 1931, at the age of 16 he became the secretary of the London Buddhist Lodge, which had been established by the Theosophists and was then run by the barrister Christmas Humphreys. In that time he also experimented with various forms of meditation and wrote essays on Buddhism. In 1936 he published his first book, *The spirit of Zen*, and two years later he moved to the United States. There he engaged in formal Zen

training before he decided to enter the Anglican School in Illinois where he studied Christian scriptures, theology and church history and was awarded a Masters Degree. In 1945 Watts became an Episcopalian priest and in 1950 he moved to California where he joined the American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco. In the mid 50s he left the faculty and began a freelance career as a writer, broadcaster and lecturer. In 1957, aged 42, he published *The Way of Zen*, which became a widely read classic. Watts practised various forms of meditation and, in the 1960s, experimented with psycho-active drugs such as Mescaline, LSD and Marihuana. Reportedly, he later commented on his psychedelic drug use: "When you get the message, hang up the phone." He was interested in a wide range of religions and philosophies focusing on Abrahamic, Indian, and Far Eastern traditions. Through this, he argued, he could employ a comparative approach, also known as triangulation, comparing and contrasting various aspects with each other so as to understand them better. As mentioned before, Watts developed a unique style fusing together ancient wisdom and contemporary fields of science such as semantics, cybernetics, psychoanalysis, and ecology. In his last book, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, he presented himself as a 'Zennist' in spirit. Child rearing, the arts, cuisine, education, law and freedom, architecture, sexuality, and the uses and abuses of technology were all of great interest to him.

Watts often said of himself that he wished to act as a bridge between the ancient and the modern, the East and the West and between culture and nature.

He passed on in November 1973. His legacy: a rich body of work for the generations to come.

In memory of Alan Watts

Alan Watts liked to say that we are all perfect as a cloud. That is to say we are how we are, like trees, some grow tall, others short. We are furthermore 100 percent natural. We also are perfectly in tune with, and inextricably intertwined with anything and everything around us, whether we like it or not and whether we are aware of it or not.

Nevertheless, we sometimes have the feeling to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Other times, however, we have the opposite feeling, of being in exactly the right place at exactly the right time. Then, everything seems to run smoothly and everything seems to be in tune. We experience effortlessness as we move seemingly from within and things around us progress by themselves.

In those situations we feel at ease and at one with our environment. We feel we belong and we feel that everything is good. Our expectations are met by our experience and our actions and reactions interlock seamlessly.

While we are as perfect as a cloud and as beautiful as a flower, we don't always feel that way.

Why is that?

Clouds have no mind or so we think. They drift, we say, hang in the skies and move with the air. They fly above a lake, but do not stop to look at their reflection. They stay in one place for a time but do not get impatient. They appear out of no where and are not astonished, vanish into thin air and are not disturbed by it. And notice: clouds are always exactly in the right place at the right time.

Wouldn't it be amazing to always be in exactly the right place at exactly the right time?

Well, people have a mind, or so we think. They are rational actors, we say, and mould their lives like a potter fashions a pot. They pass by a mirror and stop to gaze at the quality of their reflection. They stay in one place for a little too long and get impatient because they actually want to be somewhere else. They appear out of nowhere and then come up with the most complicated and vivid theories about their origins, ending up arguing and fighting with each other about whose theories are more true. They hear that they will vanish into thin air and are terribly afraid about it, to the extent that they invest the greatest efforts to try and prevent this from happening for as long as possible.

But still, people are as perfect as a cloud, as beautiful as a flower and always in exactly the right place at exactly the right time! If only they knew.

Links:

<http://www.chinaheritageneewsletter.org>
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